

NBC NIGHTLY NEWS
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FILE ONLY

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Ronald Pelton Spy Trial

TOM BROKAW: Ronald Pelton, who sold out his country for \$35,000, is guilty of spying for the Soviet Union. Pelton was in deep financial trouble when he approached the Soviets offering to sell what he knew from his days as an employee of the National Security Agency. That's the agency responsible for this country's most sensitive electronic intelligence gathering, spying. Pelton knew a lot and he sold it cheap.

NBC's James Polk on the jury's verdict returned today.

JAMES POLK: The jury struggled through 13 hours of deliberations over two days to reach its verdict. The jury foreman rose: Guilty of conspiracy. Guilty of espionage. Guilty on two lesser counts.

Pelton stared straight ahead, his hand at his chin, no expression on his face. One juror sobbed and wiped away tears. Other jurors looked tired and drained.

Pelton was found innocent of one charge involving his first 1980 trip to meet the KGB in Vienna. The jury found cash deposits in the bank to back up his later trip, but not enough evidence to corroborate his first one.

Pelton will be sentenced at the end of July.

The defense attorney spoke for Pelton.

FRED BENNETT: He's disappointed. I saw some tears welling up in his eyes. And it's obviously a tough thing to stomach.

POLK: One jurors thoughts.

THERESA BEDNARCZYK: It was a very trying and difficult experience. Very trying.

POLK: The defense had accused the FBI of tricking Pelton into confessing.

The U.S. Attorney.

BRECKENRIDGE WILLCOX: I'm particularly pleased that the verdict fully vindicates the investigative techniques of the FBI.

POLK: The FBI missed a chance to catch Pelton when he first telephoned the Russian Embassy on a winter day in 1980, a call the FBI wire-tapped.

[Clip of telephone call]

POLK: But no one was watching when Pelton walked in the front door because the phone call was taped by a computer and no one typed up the transcript until several days later.

It was not until last fall that KGB agent Vitaly Yurchenko tipped off the CIA during his on-again, off-again defection.

In this cloak-and-dagger game, there was confusion and comedy on both sides. Yurchenko said Pelton asked that first day to be paid in gold bullion. Yurchenko did not know what bullion was. He thought the spy wanted to be paid in chicken soup.

In the end, Pelton was paid in cash, \$35,000, a bargain for the Russians.

He could be sentenced to up to three life terms plus ten years in prison.